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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DJIBOUTI 001277

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SUBJECT: CONVERSATION WITH OPPOSITION PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

REF: DJIBOUTI 1250

Classified By: Ambassador Marguerita D. Ragsdale.
For reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (U) SUMMARY: In a statement to the press 30 August 2004, Mohamed Daoud Chehem, president of opposition Djiboutian Party for Development (PDD), declared his candidacy for the presidential race to take place in April/May 2005. Chehem visited Ambassador Ragsdale 29 September as a courtesy call to explain his position. Chehem's party is aligned with three other opposition parties in the Union for Democratic Alternance coalition. Chehem explained that his candidacy was for his party alone and there are likely to be candidates from the other parties. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) Mohamed Daoud Chehem, President of opposition political party PDD, paid a call September 28 on Ambassador Ragsdale to clarify the intent behind his 30 August announcement of his candidacy for president of Djibouti. Pol/Econ (notetaker) and Pol Assistant sat in on the meeting. Chehem stated at the outset that he would like to clarify what his announcement means for the opposition coalition. He continued that the opposition has the intent of presenting more than one candidate for next year's presidential race in order to reduce the chance of Ismail Omar Guelleh being re-elected. Chehem explained that in Djibouti, people follow their tribe in voting. If only one candidate is presented by the opposition there is no chance to use tribal alignments to the opposition's advantage. Chehem explained that his announcement only concerned his own party and the other parties in the coalition would likely present their own candidates. He assured Ambassador that he would defer to the opposition candidate with the most votes for the second round of voting.

3. (C) In Djibouti's election procedures, if no candidate receives more than 50 percent of the vote, a run-off election must take place. Chehem stated that by splitting the opposition in the first round, the possibility existed of pulling more Somali votes from Guelleh. After the first round, the opposition would unite again against Guelleh.

4. (C) Chehem then turned the topic of conversation to his thoughts on the state of governance in Djibouti. In plain words, Chehem said, there is no state in Djibouti. Rather, the state consists of one man. He continued that the disparity between rich and poor in Djibouti grows. Chehem said that Guelleh and he "do not have the same concept of serving the state." On Guelleh's rule, he offered the view that there is too much corruption and total impunity. There are laws on the books, but no one enforces them. "When Hassan Gouled was in power, Chehem added, there was at least a pretense of governance."

5. (C) In Chehem's opinion, lack of money is not a problem in Djibouti. He repeatedly said: "we have the money, we have the resources, they are mismanaged, they go into the pockets of different people." For Chehem, it is the government that has created poverty in Djibouti. Resources have been increased, but services decreased. Chehem was adamant that many problems could be improved by better managing the state's income. He continued that there needs to be more motivation for people to do better and severity and sanctions when people do wrong. Chehem commented that there formerly existed a service to maintain and clean the city, in the capital and in the districts. He continued that the resources to employ people for that service are still there but are not being used or funds for the service are being diverted. Chehem stated that official fiscal assets for the state in the first six months of this year was 13.5 billion DF (approx. 76 million USD), and double that for the full year's budget. This figure does not include aid funding from the French or the U.S., which adds another 40 billion DF (approx. 226 million USD), according to Chehem. (Note: Chehem did not detail what the annual output for payment of state obligations was for FY 2004. Without that balance post cannot comment on Chehem's claim of money mismanagement. End Note.)

6. (C) When asked about economic projects that Guelleh has introduced, Chehem was extremely negative. He stated that the project at Port of Doraleh is a private project that does not benefit the people. Rather, its profits go to three people: businessman Abdourahman Boreh, President Guelleh and

the state of Dubai. He continued that 70 percent of the workers are foreigners and that Djiboutians are not happy with that. Chehem did say that it is necessary to expand the port, but that this particular venture was a monopoly.

17. (C) In response to Ambassador's question regarding whether Chehem perceived a desire by Djibouti to look northwards toward the Arab world or southwards toward Africa, Chehem stated "We are an African country and we consider ourselves African." He explained that Djibouti has stronger ties with Ethiopia and Somalia. Somalia joined the Arab League to put more pressure on France to give Djibouti independence, and that once gained, Djibouti felt compelled to also join. He commented that there formerly was business with Rwanda, Uganda and Zaire (Democratic Republic of Congo) at the port. Djibouti is ready to do resume such business, but there is no justice. Chehem agreed that there was not a high volume of business from Africa at present, but in order to promote it, greater protections for the investors in the judicial system would be needed.

18. (C) BIO: Chehem is an Afar from the northern region of Djibouti. He was Director of the Cabinet for the Prime Minister in 1978 and served three years as Finance Minister. Chehem was a member of the armed faction of FRUD, the opposition party that rebelled in the early 1990's resulting in ten years of civil war. Chehem was jailed in 1990 for his involvement in FRUD. After his release he went to Ethiopia, but was extradited back to Djibouti in 1998.

19. (C) COMMENT: Common opinion of Chehem in Djibouti is that he is fairly even minded and not predisposed to favor his clan over any other. Reportedly, during his time as Finance minister, he tried to govern by the book and to accomplish change. This is also the reported reason as to why he was removed from that position. Chehem's demeanor is very congenial but he lacks the charisma of a leader. His ideas seem honestly conveyed and he appears genuinely to desire change, but he lacks an explanation on how he would accomplish any of his goals. Post cannot yet comment on the extent of support for Chehem in the Djiboutian community.
END COMMENT.
RAGSDALE